DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 345 FL 001 356

By-Miller, Virgil

Teaching Culture through Reading.

Southern Conference on Language Teaching, Atlanta, Ga.

Pub Date Feb 69

Note-5p., Paper presented at the Southern Conference on Language Teaching (5th, Atlanta, Georgia, February 13-15, 1969)

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.35

Descriptors-Content Reading, *Cross Cultural Training, Cultural Awareness, Cultural Differences, Cultural Education, Cultural Environment, Directed Reading Activity, Foreign Culture, *Guidelines, *Language Teachers, Latin American Culture, Reading Assignments, *Reading Materials, Reading Material Selection, *Secondary School Students, Spanish Culture, Teaching Methods

Guidelines for developing cross-cultural awareness and understanding in high school students studying a second language are offered to teachers of all languages, but more detailed references are supplied for the teacher of Spanish. Suggestions include teaching the familiar first, presenting a well-rounded view of the target culture, balancing the exotic with the everyday aspects, stressing cultural and intrinsic worth, reading worthwhile cultural materials in English, and providing intensive reading experiences of a wide range of materials both in the classroom and at home. A number of appropriate materials are mentioned. (AF)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

TEACHING CULTURE THROUGH READING

In spite of the marvelous technological advances of today and the vast increase in student travel abroad, it is still through the medium of the written word that the average high school student of a foreign language gains most of his knowledge about and attitudes toward the foreign culture. The same type of student who insists that the Spanish arrangement of words is "backwards" may well come to the conclusion that hispanic peoples are inherently lazy or that the French lack a sense of morals. In the acquiring and developing of cultural insights, as in the acquiring and developing of language skills, the student must perforce be guided, restrained, or encouraged by the teacher. Only as his progress in learning about the culture is carefully structured, will he be able to gain an overview and a grasp of specifics that will make possible a well-balanced and mature awareness of the essential factors of the culture. Only as he learns to see not only the separate facets of the culture, but the integrated whole, will he be ready to begin to comprehend what it is that gives validity to the values, the assumptions, the way of life of the people who live and function within that culture.

Since this whole process is under the guidance of the teacher, it must be assumed that the teacher has a thorough grasp not only of the target culture, but of the student's native culture as well. It would be well for the teacher to remember that just as there are points of interference between two languages that impede learning, so there are points of interference between cultures that hinder understanding. Thus, the teacher should be cognizant of the effect the student's native culture (its patterns, values and assumptions) will have on his awareness of and understanding of the foreign culture. It is the purpose of this paper to present guidelines that may be of some help to the teacher as he seeks to use the printed page in deepening his student's knowledge of and appreciation for the target culture. Some of these guidelines may of course be applicable to other media of culture-teaching as well.

ED 007 356
FL 001 356

It is a sound pedagogical principle to begin with that which is known. Since many students have an innate distrust of anything different or foreign, the teaching of the target culture might begin with something that has a close counterpart in the native culture. Then go from the familiar to the foreign. In other words, teach the similarities before the differences. It is often surprising how many similarities can be found between two seemingly very different cultures. By proceeding in this way, the student is not overwhelmed at the very beginning with misunderstood cultural differences that may permanently distort his understanding of the people whose language he is learning. The teacher should explain at the start that the similarities will be followed by differences.

The teacher who loves the foreign language and the culture it reflects may be sorely tempted to present only the more pleasing aspects of the target culture and to neglect or completely ignore those things that are not quite so pleasant. This, while understandable and often indulged in, will not present a complete, well-rounded view of the target culture to the student and will actually hinder the development of cross-cultural understanding. After all, the high school student of today knows that all is not sweetness and light in any culture, including his own. Therefore, the student who learns of the warm family relationships and the small number of divorces in hispanic countries, should at least know what is meant by the "casa chica". The reading of Maria should be balanced by Santa. In thus presenting all aspects of a culture, the teacher should avoid unreasonable extremes, should keep the good of his students always in mind, and should strive to stay in the "Via Media" so beloved of Elizabeth I of England. Teaching of this kind, or of any other kind, should of course never be above the student's mental, emotional or social maturity level. Just because a student can read a given book in the foreign language does not necessarily mean that he is ready for the cultural concepts evidenced therein.

The student's interest is easily captured by mention of the exotic in the target culture. While the exotic certainly has its place in teaching for cross-cultural understanding, it needs to be balanced by the ordinary, the everyday. Some Frenchmen do eat snails. Most Frenchmen eat a lot of bread. The boys who dive from the cliffs at Acapulco

are certainly a part of Mexican life. So are the boys who pedal a heavily laden bicycle, selling milk from door to door. Here again, there should be a careful balance between two opposing aspects of the culture. The student must go beyond the facade of the exotic in order to discover the reality of the commonplace.

It will be necessary to tell the students at the beginning, and to remind them unceasingly, that the target culture is not inferior to their own, nor is it superior. It is simply itself, with its own values, its own way of thinking. It is unique, as is each culture, and its intrinsic worth may only be determined by how its people function within it. Students will have a clearer conception of this, when they understand the reason behind some particular facet of a culture.

In teaching something of the attitudes of Mexican men, for example, a very worthwhile piece of supplementary reading would be El Laberinto de la Soledad by Octavio Paz. A careful reading of this will enable the student to begin to see something of the interrelationships of a culture and its practitioners.

Many times we assume that all reading the student does to find information about the target culture should be done in the target language. The validity of this assumption is open to question. Some of the most worthwhile books on certain phases of hispanic American life are the books by Oscar Lewis such as Five Families, Children of Sanchez, Pedro Martinez, and Vida. Why should a student read these in a Spanish translation, even if such a translation existed? The average high school or college student would gain infinitely more cultural insight from books of such depth by reading them in his mother tongue. And as such books are read in English, correlation of foreign language and culture study with other areas of the curriculum such as social studies becomes easier and more meaningful. Many students would read these books and similar works in English who would never spend the time required to read them in Spanish.

The groundwork for student development in cross-cultural understanding is laid in the intensive reading done in class. Here the teacher introduces the cultural values, themes and assumptions and here the student learns to recognize these for what they are when he meets them while reading outside of class. This intensive reading in class should be balanced by extensive reading as part of the student's homework. In his assigned extensive reading, the student is able, by reason of his training in class, to spot additional examples of the things discussed by his teacher and thus strengthen and make permanent his understanding of the target culture. The teacher, of course, must know the cultural content of what he assigns, and each assignment is made to develop cultural understanding as well as to further the student's reading ability. And just as words are taught in context, so should the different phases of the culture be taught in context. Only as the teacher is completely familiar with his text will he be able to decide on the most appropriate place to introduce a certain cultural item. This might be tied to language study per se. For instance, study of the use of diminutives in Spanish might well lead to a discussion of humour, sarcasm, scorn or boasting in hispanic culture. Along with the word "casa" the students might learn the meaningful expression, "La casa es chica, pero acogedora." This could then be contrasted with the American "No house is large enough for two families." As cultural information is thus learned in context, it becomes a more permanent part of the student's storehouse of knowledge. Once a student has learned to look for evidence of culture patterns, he will sometimes have the thrill of discovering what no one has seen before him.

In assigning extensive reading, the teacher will need to forget the idea that all such reading must be done in "good" or "great" literature. This type of literature has its place, of course, but if the student is limited to this alone, his understanding of the foreign culture will be incomplete and warped. His reading in the foreign language should include newspapers, magazines, comics, etc. In short, he should read what the student of his own age who is a member of the target culture would read. Only thus can he come to a full understanding of the culture as portrayed in print.

Above all, the teacher should be realistic about standards and objectives. The student cannot be expected to have as much enthusiasm for the foreign culture as the teacher has. The teacher should never try to give his students complete immunization against cultural shock in one culture capsule. There is no such thing as "instant cultural awareness".

We teach the facts about the other culture, the values, and the assumptions, hoping that cross-cultural understanding will be the result. This is our ultimate objective. We may be reasonably sure that if not understanding, certainly cross-cultural awareness, will result. Once the student's awareness of cultural differences and similarities is well fixed, he may take the next step toward real cross-cultural understanding. For our purposes, we may think of this understanding as a transmutation of knowledge and experiences into sensitivity and the ability to function easily and well within the limits of the target culture.

For anyone not brought up in the foreign culture, there will always be a certain strangeness, a certain lack of ease in some situations. There will always be some difficulties, some more or less minor annoyances. The cultural differences will probably never be fully resolved nor will they fade away completely. However, by careful, extended, well structured training, one may learn to live with these differences, however interesting, charming, or frustrating they may be.

# # #

Virgil Miller
Associate State Supervisor of Foreign Languages
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
Raleigh, North Carolina

February 1969